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Every place has its history. But what is it about New Orleans that makes it more than just the sum of the events that have happened there? What is it about the spirit of the people who live there that could produce a music, a cuisine, an architecture, a total environment, the mere mention of which can bring a smile to the face of someone who has never even set foot there?

What is the meaning of a place like that, and what is lost if it is lost?

The winds of Hurricane Katrina, and the national disaster that followed, brought with them a moment of shared cultural awareness: Thousands were killed and many more displaced; promises were made, forgotten, and renewed; the city of New Orleans was engulfed by floodwaters of biblical proportions—all in a wrenching drama that captured international attention. Yet the passing of that moment has left too many questions.

What will become of New Orleans in the months and years to come? What of its people, who fled the city on a rising tide of panic, trading all they knew and loved for a dim hope of shelter and rest? And, ultimately, what do those people and their city mean to America and the world?

In *Why New Orleans Matters*, award-winning author and New Orleans resident Tom Piazza illuminates the storied culture and uncertain future of this great and most neglected of American cities. With wisdom and affection, he explores the hidden contours of familiar traditions like Mardi Gras and Jazz Fest, and evokes the sensory rapture of the city that gave us jazz music and Creole cooking. He writes, too, of the city's deep undercurrents of corruption, racism, and injustice, and of how its people endure and transcend those conditions. And, perhaps most important, he asks us all to consider the spirit of this place and all the things it has shared with the world—grace and beauty, resilience and soul. "That spirit is in terrible jeopardy right now," he writes. "If it dies, something precious and profound will go out of the world forever."

Why New Orleans Matters is a gift from one of our most talented writers to the beloved and important city he calls home—and to a nation to whom that city's survival has been entrusted.

Why New Orleans Matters Details

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LibraryCin says

3.5 stars

This book was written a very short time after Hurricane Katrina. Katrina hit at the end of August in 2005, and this book was copyrighted the same year. In Part I, the author describes the culture of New Orleans: the food, the music, the parades, Jazz Fest, Mardi Gras... He also talks about the bad side: the crime, the poverty. In Part II, he looks at the devastation caused by Katrina and contemplates the rebuilding.

I liked it. I've been there once, and I already wanted to go back... and the book made me want to go back even more! I was there in 2011, and most of the places I visited hadn't been affected by the flooding. I did get to one of the affected areas that still, in 2011, mostly hadn't been fixed up. Reading the book certainly brought back some good memories of my visit, though!

Alison says

This was a quick read - more like a long essay, or a series of short ones. I do wish Piazza had gone into more depth; especially in the first few chapters where he describes New Orleans, there's an ongoing reliance of lists. Lists of bars and restaurants, lists of musicians and bands, etc. I would have liked to hear a little bit about each one and why it makes the cut for him. But, overall a nice easy read to pick up before a trip.

Charles Fried says

Written just after Katrina this small book thoughtfully considers the characteristics that make NOLA unique and wothwhile. Even-handedly detailiing both the good and bad, the author makes a good case for the city, with contagious affection that maKes me want to visit again. At the time of publication the future of the city was not assured but it seems to be recovering somewhat. I wonder about the author's view of post-Katrina progress.

Tara says

I loved this book immensely. The author paints a beautiful, sad, and poignant portrait of life in New Orleans, pre and post-Katrina, and makes the reader understand the value of the city of New Orleans. At one point, I had to take a break from reading because it was so heartbreaking to think of the turmoil that so many people lived through, (and are still going through in some cases) losing their homes and culture, possessions, pets and friends. My heart aches at the losses but still I smiled at the end with the author's description of how he feels that New Orleans will be great again as long as the spirit of the people is not broken.

Vickie says

For New Orleans residents, both past and present, the first third of Piazza's book is filled with the sights, sounds, tastes and smells (for better or for worse) of the city we love so much. It is rich and emotional, but at times repetitive. He waxes poetic about New Orleans, and it's like a free trip to all the wonderful places you see in your dreams.

Piazza then spends the second third of the book explaining how the true spirit of New Orleans was born from the efforts, struggles and mere daily existence of the city's poorest residents. He strongly criticizes those who might be bold enough to suggest that the "underprivileged" somehow got a second chance at life because of the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. In the last third, Piazza worries over the future of New Orleans, post-Katrina. Would those who hold the purse strings allow it to become another Las Vegas? Would the spirit of New Orleans be lost, and simply remain a chapter in history? Six years later, it's still hard to say. There are elements of both going on in NOLA, but I think it's safe to say that the spirit of that place is alive and well. It can never be lost, as long as people exist who love the old New Orleans and are willing to fight for it.

Seth says

Don't know that I've ever bought a book from an airport bookstore but after a recent, quick trip to New Orleans, I found myself morbidly drawn to the Katrina story, which I knew in a sort of way. Essentially, this book is an extended essay, as the title suggests, on New Orleans and its charms and its troubles. Very readable if a little preachy (but who can blame him, given that he wrote it during the George W. Bush years?). And though the city seems far from those tenuous days of 2005 when there was debate about whether or not to save it, this book's a nice little primer on our most unique--and fun--town.

Jen says

Before going to Jamaica, I read two books that greatly amplified my experience there: Catch a Fire: the Life of Bob Marley and The History of the Jamaican People. (Yeah, I know, there's something obliquely offensive about the title, but the content was good.) This travel time, before going to New Orleans, I'm reading Why New Orleans Matters and one other book that I will only admit to in person, but not in writing on the Internet. Piazza's book, which is really just a travel memoir, (even though he lived in New Orleans for many years) doesn't give a great deal of history. It's more like his impressions, feelings, and introspections on a city he came to love as a dear friend. It reminds me mildly of Eat, Pray, and Love, although, as one might expect, it has less to say on emotions and more to say on sensory details. I might not find it too interesting if I were not going there in a few weeks, but, as it is, I've thoroughly enjoyed it. I only have about 90 minutes left to go on it, but I'm intrigued about how he's going to wrap it up, as he wrote it both before and after Katrina.

Wow -- this sounds soooooo bad, but the last chapter was a real killer. It was like reading someone's therapy journal after major post-traumatic stress syndrome. Obviously, it's well-earned, but, whew! hard to read!

Alexandra says

Having lived in New Orleans for two years, I learned very quickly that there's a certain *je ne sais quoi* about the place. Certain aspects of the Crescent City are beyond description. Despite the crime, the corruption, and the inconvenient (to say the least) location, something about New Orleans makes you fall deeply in love with it. To miss New Orleans is like missing an absent lover. It's like voodoo magic floats through the streets, working its way under your skin and inhabiting your soul. This is not something easily explained to those who have not been there--it's something that's felt instead. I have never heard someone put this unique emotional attachment into words quite so well as Tom did. It read like a plaintive love letter to the city. I cannot begin to imagine what it was like to live through Katrina. Written in the wake of the disaster, this book was for all those who thought New Orleans wasn't worth saving. Tom is here to tell you, in beautiful language, why that's such a terrible thing to think.

Also, I loved this book so much that I e-mailed him. He responded and was so, SO nice. Found out we had lived on the same street, too. Only wish I'd have known about this book sooner, before I moved back home, so I could have bumped into him on a walk and told him how great it was.

Bob Redmond says

Music critic and novelist Piazza has written a sensitive, deeply sympathetic portrait of New Orleans before and after Hurricane Katrina. The first part of the short book tells of the character of the city, particularly through its festivals and events as experienced by Piazza (N.O. is his adopted home). The second, blistering, part tells of the emotional destruction of that character, again through a first-person eyewitness account.

Piazza makes his case well: New Orleans, which has contributed to most of the country's great cultural achievements, matters because it's unique, alive, and most of all beloved. He stops short of lecturing, and makes implicit this question: if we let New Orleans die (via developers or neglect), what good are we? What's the point of anything if our nation can't sustain one of our most vibrant and life-affirming cities? He lays out the facts but mostly proves this by example: has any writer confessed his feelings for a city in such a love letter? There is probably a tradition of this too, and Piazza's account must stand among the most impassioned.

My two quibbles are these: the traditions he describes in Part One are, at the youngest, 40 years old. The artists he names are practically all old-age, and the traditions tilting towards re-enactments rather than new and living expressions. It's no wonder certain forces want to turn the city into a museum/caricature. On the other hand, it seems clear enough that Piazza feels these are still vital and living traditions, and I suppose that he would cite numerous younger artists and participants if pressed. I wish he addressed this issue more completely.

The other quibble is that throughout, he refers to the people of the city as "they." It's an odd perspective for someone so proud and passionate about the city. I wonder what are the racial and social boundaries are that he implicitly describes himself as an outsider. Unless he is putting the reader in a certain point of view: we (readers) are the outsiders to the "they" of the residents.

Those misgivings aside, this is still a remarkable and gorgeous and harrowing short book that reminds us of some of the vital things about humans, cities, and the possibility of our nation.

Ray Lang says

A treacly, maudlin travelogue, and in some parts insulting to native New Orleanians (this one, anyway).

Karen says

I read this after hearing Guy Gonzalez mention it on Reading Lives, a Book Riot podcast. Gonzalez made me want to go on an irresponsible New Orleans reading tear--irresponsible because I have plenty of other books to read right now, and there's no good reason for New Orleans to leapfrog to the top of my TBR list. But I'm glad it did.

New Orleans is an amazing city, and Piazza makes a surprisingly fresh, humanist case for it. That might sound callous, but there's plenty of careless, lazy rhetoric around how "Nawlins" is a special place that must be preserved because of its quirkiness, its climate, its eccentric residents, etc. It's all true--there is no other city in America like New Orleans, for lots of reasons (many of them horrible and heartwrenching, having to do with slavery and colonialism as much as moonlight and magnolias.) But that superficial, dumbed-down, touristified idea of New Orleans as a kind of wacky adult playground is profoundly off-putting--it takes more than day-glo plastic Hurricane cups and reams of cheap shiny beads to make a place significant.

Piazza spends almost no time on the history of the city--as he points out, there are plenty of other books that will give you that history, including *The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square*, which is also on my night stand right now. Instead, he delivers an extended personal essay about his very personal love for the city, and his grief at the damage that Katrina caused. He name-checks restaurants, clubs, streets, and individuals both renowned and obscure, at least to non-New-Orleansians. (My wife is from Baton Rouge, and didn't recognize all of Piazza's references.) He writes vividly about the phenomenon of the jazz funeral, about the Indian krewes of Mardi Gras--their music as well as their costumes and floats--about second-lining and jazz music and the kinds of wonderful meals you can get in small delis and bars around the city.

A lot of what he writes is wonderfully personal, like the time that he broke his glasses dancing in a bar and a woman working at an all-night gas station fixed them for him with her fingernail glue, no cost. Or the day he finagled his way back into the city after Katrina to check on his house, and after a few horrible, traumatic hours of seeing dead bodies and ruined homes and armed National Guardsmen, he fell in with a group of people giving out free soda, beer, and burgers from their storefront to anyone who wanted them, as long as their supplies held out.

Piazza touches on the awful unfairness of the city, the cheek-by-jowl of rich and poor, white and black, and the way that the haves stay willfully blind and ignorant to the needs of the have-nots. He doesn't gloss over the bad stuff, or try to paint New Orleans as any kind of paradise. But what he returns to, again, and again, is the hospitality, community, roots, and joy that make New Orleans distinct from, say, Seattle or Houston. If New Orleans has a spirit, that's what defines it. Piazza argues that, above everything else, makes it worth

preserving--and after reading this book, I agree.

Kayla says

I cried while reading this book. Literally, I cried. Piazza's account of New Orleans post-Katrina makes you feel the tragedy that it is to possibly lose such a place. At the very least you learn to appreciate New Orleans, if not want to hop a plane to help rebuild. New Orleans is more than just some location in southern Louisiana. New Orleans is a place of culture, history, music, food, family and friends, and the supernatural. The place has a strange yet wonderful magic to it. Most importantly, it is HOME to so many people. To anyone who loves Crescent City, read this book. And to anyone who questions why the heck New Orleans should be saved, READ. THIS. BOOK.

Mark says

This is an interesting book, in two parts. The first is an attempt by Piazza to capture the spirit, the soul of New Orleans in words. The second is about the aftereffects of Katrina. Both are interesting. And I have to say it is odd, perhaps, that I am not more enamored of New Orleans than I am. In a lot of ways, I am pursuing the mysticism that makes America what it is. There is a lot of that in New Orleans, I have to admit. Perhaps I need to make a road trip. Perhaps. Anyway, what drew me to this work is one of my perennial concerns, how the peculiar relation between location and the people in it gives a place a soul, so to speak. I am a pretty firm believer that everywhere has such an anima. Well, everywhere that has been inhabited for any length of time. Sometime it is difficult to get in touch with it, and sometimes familiarity builds blindness to what is there, but I've been lucky enough to find a way to get in touch with some part of it wherever I've been. Anyway, an interesting book. Recommended.

Marlène says

Je suis monomaniacque. Tout ce qui touche à la Nouvelle Orléans... J'ai lu et vu pas mal de fiction sur la ville, dans la ville, pas loin de la ville... Pas mal de non-fiction aussi, en majorité sur la musique... Ah, la musique. Ou plutôt LES musiques. Je ne parle même pas de la cuisine, de ses mélanges, couleurs, sauces...

Mais jamais je n'avais lu une telle déclaration d'amour, inconditionnelle, entière, sans concession. À la Nouvelle Orléans, à son Âme, que nous ne pouvons que deviner à travers son histoire, sa musique, sa cuisine, sa culture, sa chaleur humaine, sa violence et sa pauvreté aussi, et l'interaction de chacun de ces éléments et de bien d'autres qui lui sont propres...

Ce livre a été écrit comme un cri du coeur dans la détresse et la peur de l'auteur (et sans aucun doute de chacun des habitants ou simples amoureux, visiteurs ou pas, de la ville) de voir cette Âme disparaître au lendemain des ravages de Katrina.

Tom Piazza, principalement journaliste musical spécialisé dans le jazz mais également auteur de fiction, nous présente la Nouvelle Orléans, à travers ses propres rencontres, d'abord au cours de visites pour l'incontournable Jazz Fest, puis en tant qu'habitant, après avoir décidé de ne pas quitter la ville. La manière dont il parle de la nourriture est à pleurer... Et son expérience de la chaleur humaine, de la positivité et de la

créativité de tant de gens qui vivent dans une misère qui paraît surréaliste dans un tel pays, ou simplement du petit coup de pouce d'une inconnue dans des lieux et à des moments inattendus... Sans parler des Mardi Gras Indiens et des vieux bluesmen et jazziers... tellement de chose...

La deuxième moitié du livre est un très très lourd contre-poids à tant de lumière et de chaleur. Un court rappel des événements puis témoignage de la traversée de la ville 15 jours après l'ouragan... incroyable et déchirant. Mais l'espoir qui semble caractéristique de chaque particule de la culture de la Nouvelle Orléans n'est jamais loin.

Un petit ajout quelques années plus tard par l'auteur, un point quelques années plus tard et une prise de position pour la rénovation "bottom-up", avec tout ce qui est déjà-là, plutôt que "top-down" avec une dénaturation d'une ville à la culture et l'histoire aussi riches.

Vous avez été pris dans l'excellent "When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts" de Spike Lee ou la suite 4 ans plus tard, "If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise"? Vous êtes fan de Treme? Vous lisez en anglais? N'hésitez pas!

Redsteve says

While this is a very readable little book, it's just that: a LITTLE book. It has a feel like someone took a post-Katrina editorial and pumped it full of steroids. This means that, although it tries to cover a lot of ground, it perforce has to do it without a great degree of depth. It's more of the personal impressions of the author rather than a history of the city, or even the Storm itself. That being said, I do agree with 90% of what he has to say. On the positive side, it's a decently written piece on the city, good and bad, as well as the effects of the Storm and various ideas about how to go about rebuilding it. There are some places where he comes off a bit touristy, and others where he seems to be berating tourists, which is not totally out of place when you consider NOLA's ambivalent relationships with the free-spending (we hope) hoards that visit our city. His history is also a bit spotty in places, and he ends up repeating a number of the false stories (people shooting at rescue workers from their rooftops, gang rapes in evacuation centers, etc.) from Katrina, but I'll give him a pass on those since he's writing shortly after the hurricane, while these "facts" were still being reported on the national news. If you want a quick read on the things that make New Orleans, New Orleans and the Storm and its aftermath, this is a good place to start. However, if you're looking for a more in-depth account of the disaster, I recommend Jed Horne's BREACH OF FAITH. I also recommend ONE DEAD IN ATTIC, a series of articles written in the aftermath of Katrina by local columnist Chris Rose. I give WHY NEW ORLEANS MATTERS 3.5 stars.
